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CHAPTER 4

THE PEOPLE OF THE WHITE PRINCE

IN A.D. 1252 Mongol troops under the command of the prince who later reigned as the Emperor Yuan Shih Tsu—better known in Europe as Kublai Khan—captured Ta Li from the last ruler of the Kingdom of Nan Chao. From that time to the present day the Min Chia who inhabit that district have been subjects of the dynasties which successively ruled China. Some remnant of local authority was left to the descendants of the Tuan dynasty of Nan Chao during the Mongol (Yuan) period, but when the Chinese Ming dynasty drove out the Mongols and conquered Yunnan in 1383, even this shadow autonomy disappeared. Under the Ming Emperors and their Manchu successors Ta Li was reduced to the position of a prefecture of Yunnan province, politically on the same footing as any other city of the same rank in the Empire. The Republic abolished the distinction between prefectures, sub-prefectures and district cities (*Fu*, *Chou* and *Hsien*) renaming all as *Hsien* so that the old designation "Ta Li Fu," still found on many European maps, became obsolete, and the name used to-day is simply Ta Li.

The Mongol conquest does not seem to have been followed by any great immigration of Chinese settlers, although it is in this period that the Moslem community, originally mercenary soldiers of the conquerors, became established in the western part of Yunnan. The Ming conquest 130 years later was followed by a great immigration of Chinese, also originally soldiers, who settled in the uninhabited parts of Yunnan and probably in many places displaced unsophisticated tribesmen from the better lands. In the Min Chia country this process was restricted to the settlement of

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several Chinese families in the city itself, for there was no eviction of the Min Chia peasantry on the plain. As Ta Li had been the capital of Nan Chao it is probable that the neighbourhood was then populated by a peasantry who had already cultivated all the good land, and it was found more profitable to tax the existing population than to replace them with Chinese settlers.

Several tombs of Chinese families bearing dates from the early Ming period, the fifteenth century of the Christian Era, still stand on the slopes above Ta Li, attesting the fact of immigration and settlement by Chinese from the provinces of the lower Yang Tze valley, in which region the first Ming capital, Nanking, was established. Some of these families still remain in Ta Li to-day, and most of the old Chinese families of the place claim to have "come from Nanking" a phrase which means that their ancestors were natives of what we now call Kiangsu province. Whatever may have been the relationship between the conquerors and the Min Chia at that remote time, before long the racial distinction ceased to count as a political factor, and to-day there is no such thing as a Min Chia "nationality". The culture of the Min Chia still remains in many ways distinct, but the political fusion has become complete. The Kingdom of Nan Chao was in no sense a Min Chia kingdom, even though the district of the capital was then, as now, inhabited by Min Chia for it covered most of Yunnan and thus included a wide variety of peoples, from Tibetans and Li Su to Wa head hunters, even as the modern province of Yunnan does to-day. Even the dynasty of Nan Chao was more probably Shan than Min Chia, so that the change of rulers can hardly have seemed like a loss of independence to the men of that time.

There is thus at the present time nothing specifically Min Chia about the organisation of the government in Ta Li and the adjoining Hsien. These districts do not even follow the

snow. Toward the south, the horizon is blocked by mighty Min-shan, a chain of Matterhorns with peaks almost 6,000 meters high, with glaciers and the imposing notch of the "Stone Gate" (Shih-men) which leads over into Szechuan. There are memories of distant rides on horseback, of meditative walks beneath the deep blue sky of the alps; or of dark, storm-driven rain clouds in the solemn peace of the highlands, the quiet broken only by the song of the lark, the shrill cry of the falcon or the deep croak of the raven and the lively whistle of the ground hog. The vast steppe, utterly deserted by man, is animated now and then by herds of gazelles, a few hovering vultures or eagles high in the heavens. Or one sees a narrow valley with a row of black tents and groups of horsemen, dotted with black yak and white sheep herds, the whole strangely enlivened by the low barking of dogs and the bleating of yaks and sheep.

/3/ In earlier times Tibetan tribes were scattered far beyond the borders of present-day Tibet toward the west, as far as the provinces of Szechuan and Kansu, probably even throughout Shensi to Honan. Even today there are Tibetan tribes in Szechuan and Kansu, but culturally they have been more strongly influenced by the Chinese, often having also adopted the Chinese language. Here we find all kinds of transitions between nearly pure Tibetans and those that have been almost completely assimilated by the Chinese. In the course of the last 100 years the boundary between the provinces of Szechuan and Kansu on the one hand and Western Tibet, that is to say, the present outlying Chinese provinces of Hsik'ang and Ch'inghai (Kokonor), on the other, has been shifted several times. In Kansu the Chinese government was impelled to do this because of the gradual advance of the Chinese toward the West, and also because of difficult relationships with a third, very restless element of the population of Kansu, the Mohammedans. Although the latter have adopted the Chinese language, dress and customs, they have by no means been assimilated by the Chinese, but are consciously opposed to them. Anthropologically they can be included among the Turkish peoples of Chinese Turkestan (Sinkiang). The Chinese and Mohammedan settlements in Kansu have pushed on as far as the Chinese farmer has found proper conditions - especially on loess soil - for the type of agriculture he has practised since ancient times. In places where the bottom of the valley lends itself to irrigation, the river valleys have become rich oases with luxuriant vegetable and fruit cultures

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take to talking Chinese and to practising some of the Chinese religious observances. Then the women even will learn to speak Chinese, will wear Chinese dress and even bind their feet. Finally the Lo-lo language is gradually dropped, and the young men grow up knowing nothing but Chinese. This stage once arrived at, the transformation is nearly complete, and the next generation will probably indignantly deny their Lo-lo origin.

The same process goes on with Shan and other tribes, but in Tibet exactly the reverse takes place. The Chinese become Tibetanised, and the children of a Chinaman married to a Tibetan woman are usually brought up in the Tibetan religion and adopt Tibetan customs. In Tibet proper this is perhaps not surprising, as the country ruled by Lhasa is practically an independent kingdom and the Chinese have little influence there. But in places like Chung-tien and other districts well within China, it is somewhat astonishing to find a regularly appointed Chinese official submitting to the indignity of being a complete nonentity in the country he is supposed to rule.

I think the reason of this may be partly found in the enormous power that the lamas wield over the laymen. Forming, as they do, nearly half the male population they have all the authority in their hands, and it would be impossible for a Tibetan to conform to Chinese customs or religious observances without incurring their anger.

Another cause which keeps the Tibetan from being absorbed may be sought in the cold inhospitable nature of his country. There is nothing to tempt the Chinese to emigrate into Tibet, and consequently they are never in ufficient numbers to influence the Tibetans round them. A similar cause has preserved some of the low-lying Shan States from absorption, the heat in this case being the reason that Chinamen do not settle there.

Chung-tien stands in a large plain which at the time of our visit was very bare, as the snow had only just melted off it. A little later, when the warmth of the sun has had time to act on the soil, damp from melted snow, green grass springs up everywhere. The height of the plain is 11,800 feet, and it is too cold to grow rice or even maize: wheat is the chief crop.